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ABSTRACT

A lack of clear national goals, increased bureaucracy, the infiltration of unions into the colleges, and the increasing emphasis on personal rather than organizational priorities have contributed to a growing national malaise. Our expectations are conditioned, to a large extent, by these factors and other external influences, including parents, peers, schooling, and the media--all of which impose value systems which are not necessarily appropriate to individual objectives and growth. For instructors, the psychosocial products of the growing malaise and programmed expectations may include: (1) learned helplessness, i.e., the feeling that individual initiative will not make a difference; (2) overindulgence, resulting from increased specialization; and (3) unaccommodated personal growth which is a product of the inability to modify lifestyles to keep pace with changing needs. These conditions, and the instructor apathy that can result from them, can be overcome through a modification of expectations. Helplessness can be surmounted through self-reliance and working within the imperfect system of which one is a part. Overindulgence can be dealt with by adopting innovative approaches to teaching. Finally, problems of unaccommodated growth can be overcome by examining one's real needs, choosing among alternative occupations and activities that bring satisfaction, and working diligently at every chosen task. (HB)

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OCCUPATIONAL APATHY: A SOCIAL OR INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY?

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Do you know anyone who is:

- gainfully employed
- working in the field which they chose and for which they were trained
- subject to a bare minimum of supervision
- involved in a wide variety of social activities
- encouraged to explore creative interests
- doing purposeful work which benefits other people
- making a vital contribution to the welfare of their country (Dowdell, p.19)

and who is dissatisfied with their career? Then, chances are, you know an apathetic instructor. But, how, you have probably wondered, can anyone who is participating in life to this extent be experiencing apathy? Well, the psychologists tell us that individuals who are apathetic are those who lack a system of values to live by and who fail to commit themselves unconditionally to anything (Allport, p.195). Is it possible then that a portion of our instructor population consists of valueless individuals who are uncommitted to their profession?

The purpose of this paper is to explore some of the factors in our society and in our lives which contribute to occupational apathy. The dynamics of these factors will be examined from the standpoint of individuals pursuing professional careers to better understand the existence of apathy among the ranks of instructors. And, finally, some changes in attitudes, actions, and activities for faculty members experiencing apathy will be suggested.

OUR SOCIETY

Let's take a look, first of all, at what's happening in our country today. It is generally recognized that we do not have a unifying national goal. There is no war and no space race. Even the fight aGainst inflation seems to be over, at least temporarily. We also lack

a strong work ethic (Lewis, p.77). But if you happen to be without work, you can always live on unemployment insurance as 10% of American workers do. Our rate of productivity, output per capita, has been decreasing for several years while countries in the Far East are assuming an increasing percentage of world trade. Do we really value the fact that we are Americans?

Bureaucracy is becoming larger and larger in this country every year. The size of the federal government in terms of dollars spent and people employed is continuing to grow. State and local governments are following this lead with the result that government spending is the highest percentage of gross national product in our history. We all know the impact of this trend in terms of more regulated activity in more areas of our lives: new products are tested for safety before introduction, seat belts are required in our automobiles, student registration must reach a large prescribed minimum before a class will be taught in state colleges, and so on. Everywhere we turn, we are subjected to the rules and regulations, the policies and procedures of the bureaucrats. Is this really a country "of the people, for the people, and by the people," or have we relinquished control?

At the same time, unionization is on the increase. Organized labor has even infiltrated our colleges. For the first time in this country, college professors belong to unions. Incumbents of the most intellectual profession in the world, who can be required to spend as little as 15 hours per week in the classroom and who get a three-month summer vacation are organized against their administrations for the purpose of obtaining higher pay, better working conditions, and increased fringe benefits. Do we really know what we want?

Another fairly recent development in this country has been the "me decade of the 1970s," when people became preoccupied with the thought of "looking out for number one." The divorce rate escalated to historic highs, the human potential movement became a reality, and people asked not what they could do for their country but what their country could do

for them. Is an individual more valuable than the commitment to a relationship, a group, or an organization?

And finally, the most recent social phenomenon to have a dramatic effect on our lives has been the economic recession of 1981-1983, the worst downturn in the economy since the Great Depression of the 1930s. The number of business failures reached an all-time high and the unemployment rate exceeded 10%. What alternatives do we really have in such a time of adversity and limited opportunities?

OUR EXPECTATIONS

Our expectations in life are only partially based on these realities. More important, in many cases, are other major influences to which we are subjected. Let's consider four: our parents, our schooling, our peers, and the media. Each of these sources tends to impose upon us--consciously or unconsciously--certain expectations that we carry with us in our daily lives.

Our parents, from day one, try to impose upon us a value system which they believe works for them. These values are created by the interaction of their personalities with the environmental influences of their generation and the programming they received from their parents. However, we have our own personalities and our own environmental influences, and it is at best coincidental if our parents' value systems work for us. So we are left with the task of developing realistic expectations in life despite the existence of those conflicting value systems. Is it any wonder that our expectations are sometimes more appropriate for our parents' personalities and social environment than for our own?

The second major source of our expectations is our formal education. The facts we learn and the techniques we are taught form a basis for all of our mental activities--from problem solving to decision making to the creation of expectations. We learn about wars and we

expect to experience one or more in our lifetime. We learn about successful people and we expect to become one. But the world is changing very fast. We observe rapid changes in our institutions, our technology, and our regulations. Are we revising our expectations to remain compatible with the new developments that are occurring around us? Are we engaging in lifelong learning?

From the time we are children, our peers exert a major influence upon us. To gain their acceptance and continual approval, we more often than not do what they expect us to do. Their expectations of us become our expectations of ourselves. This social phenomenon can be motivating and stimulating if the resulting expectations are realistic, but also can be the source of internal conflict. Are your expectations today your own, or those of your peers?

During the last 30 years, the media has emerged as a force equal in power to parents, school, and peers when it comes to creating expectations. Billions of dollars are poured into advertising every year to create demand for products and services by offering to solve our problems, bring us happiness, and guarantee us the good life. After repeated exposure to these promises, we begin to assimilate their messages into our expectations. And television provides an added dimension in this respect with the programming itself. The "true-to-life" episodes we watch establish an ideal for us to live up to, or at least to imitate, in our own lives. Do you turn off the media messages which are not objective or which do not address a real need that you have?

THE ESSENCE OF APATHY

What are the results of integrating our programmed expectations with the realities of our social environment as we pursue professional careers? There are at least three psychosocial products which contribute directly to occupational apathy:

1) learned helplessness
2) overindulgence
3) unaccommodated growth.

The attitude of learned helplessness is symptomatic of those who go around saying "who gives a damn" (Houston, p.25). The existence of such feelings are understandable when we review some of the trends in our society. The absence of a national goal and the absence of a strong work ethic leave many of us unmotivated. The increasing bureaucracy and reliance on unions stifles our individual initiative. It's the old story that "you can't fight City Hall." These dynamics help create in us feelings of learned helplessness.

Bureaucracy and unionization also tend to create job specialties (Lewis, p.25). This trend is not inconsistent with our expectations. Our parents used to inquire of us, "What are you going to be when you grow up?" Among our peers, it is our position as defined by our occupation or profession that determines our status. However, spending too much time doing any one thing creates feelings of overindulgence, regardless of how much basic enjoyment we find in the activity. We never have a chance to miss the enjoyable aspects of that activity. Our interest never has a chance to wane and then build back up. We tend to lose sight of the value of that activity. Moreover, when overindulgence involves our occupational specialty, we tend to lose sight of our own personal value. Even the most glamorous professional career can be looked upon as "just a job."

The third psychosocial product that is symptomatic of instructor apathy is unaccommodated personal growth. We all change; our interests, our attitudes, and our values all evolve. However, we're not always in a position to modify our lifestyles rapidly enough to be in sympathy with our changing needs. As a result, we often end up wanting what we can't have in the short term, and not wanting we can have. Essentially, we often find ourselves trapped, victims of our formal training, the expectations of our parents and peers, and the programming of the media. Consequently, we can spend a significant portion of our lives seeking

activities which would be consistent with our changing needs, hoping to find something of current value to which we are willing to make an unconditional commitment. In the meantime, we experience apathy toward our current responsibilities and obligations.

OUR CHOICE

Thus, we have seen that we are subject to a significant number of social factors that foster apathy. Does this mean that apathy is a disease of our society? Is it something that accompanies democracy, capitalism, and technological progress? Of course not! In the final analysis, apathy is a state of mind. Its symptoms of learned helplessness, overindulgence, and unaccommodated growth result when your expectations are incompatible with the realities occurring around you. Since you can do very little to impact reality, it is your responsibility as an individual to combat apathy by modifying your expectations.

To overcome learned helplessness, here are a couple of suggestions: 1) Don't expect your specialty to serve you forever. Become more of a generalist. Do things for yourself. Demonstrate to yourself that you are not helpless. 2) Don't expect "the organization" to have your best interests in mind. Join the administration of the organization to which you belong. Learn how to work within the imperfect system that exists.

Similarly, feelings of overindulgence can be mitigated by modifying your thinking: 1) Don't rely totally on your specialty for fulfillment. Do what is interesting to you as your ideas and values change. 2) Don't expect your life to be static. Question your programming. Understand your real needs as distinct from those fabricated by outside influences. 3) Don't expect that you will never be stuck, at least temporarily. Be prepared to make the routine new and refreshing. Use new examples, guest speakers, a different format, or the latest published material to spruce up an old course (Highet, pp.75-78).

The problem of unaccommodated growth is also a matter of personal choice. Don't expect to sit back and ride the waves, letting the media dictate your interests, accepting what you have learned in school as the limits of your education, living the life expected by your peers, and pursuing a career expected by your parents. Examine your real needs and modify your lifestyle by choosing from among the thousands of alternative occupations, hobbies, and volunteer activities those which bring satisfaction to you. In other words, assume the responsibility for your own life. Establish goals in all areas of living. Be prepared to take advantage of opportunities as they arise. Don't be afraid to make decisions and take some risks. And most importantly, work diligently at whatever activities you choose. Such a philosophy leads to the construction of a personal system of values which gets imposed wherever you choose to make an unconditional commitment. In such a life, there is no room for apathy. Instructors who live in this manner pass along to their students a valuable philosophy of life as well as knowledge on a particular subject.

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